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ABSTRACT

Theorists have suggested that domestic abuse may be a result of psychopathology in the abuser or the result of severe stress. To determine whether the families of aged victims exhibit an inordinate number of stressful situations, 20 elderly abuse victims were interviewed about family relationships and problems, and completed a modified version of the Social Readjustment Rating Scale as a measure of stress. Results showed that the most common type of abuse was psychological. Physical abuse was reported by one-fourth of the victims, while 10 percent suffered physical neglect, and one-half suffered financial abuse. In over half of the cases, the abuser was a son or daughter. The victims came from settings with a large number of problems and serious stresses, including the death or illness of a friend or family member, gain of a new family member, a change in finances, or poor health. Most victims defined their most serious family problems in terms other than direct abuse. This may represent denial or resignation, or a recognition that the abuse is one portion of the greater difficulties they and their families feel. Results are compared to a Justice and Justice (1976) study of parents of abused children. (JAC)

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Abused Elders: Victims of Villains or of Circumstances?

by

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Some theorists have suggested that domestic abuse is primarily brought about by a psychopathological state in the abuser (Gelles, 1974b). Thus Coles (1964) believed that the abusing parent was mentally ill. Shainess (1977) suggests that abusive husbands are mentally ill. And other writers have taken the approach that persons who inflict abuse on defenseless old people must also be mentally ill (Lau and Kosberg, 1979). The psychopathological model of domestic abuse has come under question in recent years, however. For example, Gelles (1974b) proposes a sociological model of child abuse, in which he points out that abusive parents are often repeating behavior which they have learned from their own parents who were also abusive; in short, the only model of parenting they have ever known was abusive.

Another model which has been proposed to explain domestic abuse is the stress model. This model suggests that persons who are abusive towards members of their families are persons who have been subjected to an inordinate amount of stress. Thus Gil (1971) suggests that lower class parents are abusive because of the stresses of poverty. And several studies have pointed out that the victims of abuse are frequently persons around whom a considerable degree of family stress revolves. Thus several authorities suggest abuse is more likely to occur with children who are handicapped, premature, or the product of an unwanted pregnancy (Bishop, 1971; Zalba, 1971; Harrington, 1972; Resnick, 1969). Among the aged, Block and Sinnott (1979) have suggested that the stresses of caring for an aged and infirm relative may also produce the type of stress which may lead to abuse.

An expansion of this stress model comes from the work of Justice and Justice (1976), who suggest that it is not a single stressful incident which

produces an abusive pattern in a family. Rather it is an accumulation of a large number of stressful situations over a short period of time which generates abuse. They draw this theory from an earlier work which associated a high level of stress-producing incidents with a likelihood of physical illness (Rahe et al., 1964). Following this lead, the Justices applied an index of stress levels to a sample of abusive parents, together with a control group of non-abusive parents, in order to determine whether the abusive parents had a higher level of stress than those who were not abusive. In this paper, we propose to apply the same index (with slight modifications to accommodate an aged population) to a sample of abused elderly. These data will be compared to the two groups of parents appearing in the Justices' work, in order to determine whether the families of the aged abuse victims exhibit an inordinate number of stressful situations.

Methodology. The data are taken from a larger study of elder abuse which was conducted by the Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology under a grant from the NRTA-AARP Andrus Foundation. In this project, data on elder abuse were collected from health and social agencies in the Detroit Metropolitan Area by means of mailed questionnaires as well as individual interviews with agency directors. As a result of these contacts, 77 cases of elder abuse of all types were identified, and a case worker report was obtained on each case. Finally, an attempt was made to obtain an interview of the actual abuse victim wherever possible. Such interviews were held with 20 of the abuse victims. This paper is a report on the data collected from these 20 victim interviews.

The interviews were conducted by trained interviewers under the supervision of the co-investigators at a time and place convenient to the respondent. Information collected included the following:

- demographic characteristics of the aged respondent;
- nature of the relationship to family members;
- areas of disagreement and conflict in the family;
- other family problems;
- nature of contacts with social agenices;
- nature of contacts with other informal sources of help (such as other family contacts or friends);
- nature of reactions under stress, both generally and with specific reference of abuse;
- relationships in family over time, particularly with reference to abuse;
- belief in the appropriateness of physical punishment;
- perceived needs of the family which could be served by social agencies.

Most interviews took approximately one hour to complete; however, some interviews took much longer, especially if the victim was handicapped in some way. It was recognized that the topic of abuse would be difficult for respondents to discuss; hence the study followed Gelles's (1974a: 29-31) approach of focusing questions around general family structure and problems, with the issue of violence and abuse introduced at a later point in the interview.

At the time of the interview, a formal consent was signed by the victim. Victims were also informed at this time that the project staff would attempt to refer them to other agencies in the community which might be able to assist them with their problems.

A brief summary of the characteristics of the victims interviewed can be found in Table 1. As can be seen from the table, most victims interviewed were female (70%), which is not surprising since far more women live to this age than men. The victims were evenly divided between blacks and whites. About one third of the victims were in their 70s, with another third in their 80s. Another 15% of the victims were in their 60s, and one victim was 59. Three victims refused to tell their age.

The most common type of abuse suffered by these victims was psychological, but this is largely because this type of abuse tends to accompany the

other types as well. One fourth of the victims suffered direct physical abuse. (See Sengstock and Liang, 1982, for a definition of the types of abuse.) Another 10% suffered physical neglect, for a total of 35% who suffered a type of abuse which was capable of injuring their physical well-being. Half of the victims had suffered financial abuse. In over half of the cases (55%) the alleged abuser was the son or daughter of the victim. In 15% of the cases the abuser was the victim's spouse. Grandchildren were responsible in 10% of the cases, with the remainder (30%) being other relatives or close contacts, including nieces, nephews, landlords or roomers, or siblings.

Data Analysis

The stress experienced by the aged victims and their families will be measured in terms of three dimensions: the number of problems experienced; the types and seriousness of the problems; and their scores on a cumulative measure of the stressfulness of social situations. All three measures are drawn from a problem listing which is part of the "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967). Some introduction to the methodology and usefulness of this scale is necessary.

Holmes and Rahe were seeking a means of measuring more precisely the amount of stress which an individual was experiencing. They reasoned that it was not only the number or type of stressful events which were experienced which produced life stress. Rather they sought to develop a means for measuring the amount of stress produced by a composite of the type and amount of stress produced together by all of the problems experienced over a given period of time. The scale was developed by listing a large number

of events which might cause stress, and asking a group of subjects to rate the amount of readjustment which each event would require. The stressful rating of each event results from the average rating given that event by the judges. A summation of the scores achieved would indicate the amount of stress experienced from all sources. It should be noted that the scale emphasizes the time and difficulty required to adjust to each event, whether or not the event is desirable or pleasurable. Hence the resulting scores would indicate the degree to which an individual or family has had to expend a great deal of time and energy in readjustment to new situations, some of them unpleasant, but others being happy events. In our study, we used the scale developed by Holmes and Rahe, and modified it slightly to adapt it to an aging population. The list of problems we used, together with the readjustment value of each problem, can be found in Table 2.

At a very early point in the data collection, it became obvious that the aged persons in our study did indeed come from settings in which there were a large number of problems. As Table 3 indicates, the families which experienced only a few problems were rare. Only 15% of the aged persons reported that they had experienced 0 to 4 of the stressful events on the list. Another 20% reported having experienced 5 to 9 of the problems. Half of the respondents had had more than ten, with 20% experiencing more than 19 of the problems. The mean number of problems for the aged abuse victims was 10.95; the mode was 9 problems. Clearly these victims can be characterized as persons with serious stresses in their lives. Since many of the problems listed also involve other family members, one can also conclude that their families were undergoing considerable stress.

This picture of extreme stress becomes more evident when we analyze the types of problems which the aged victims mentioned. Table 4 lists each stressful event mentioned by at least 6 victims (30%). Seventeen problems are on this list, seven of them having a readjustment score of 35 or more. Among these were the death of a close family member, death of a close friend, or a personal injury, all of which were suffered by 30% of the victims. The gain of a new family member was experienced by 45% of the victims. Half of the victims' families experienced a change in finances. Nearly two out of three victims told us some member of their family had experienced poorer health. Finally, 80% of the victims reported that they had themselves experienced poorer health. One can certainly conclude that these victims and their families fall into the category commonly called "multi-problem families" -- families which have experienced a large number of problems over a short period of time.

This picture of a family required to make an extreme degree of adjustment over a short period of time is even more apparent when the Social Readjustment Scale scores are calculated, and results compared with the scores of other groups which are known to be violent or non-violent families. In Table 5, we compare the Social Readjustment scores of our group of 20 aged victims of abuse with the two groups of parents studied by Justice and Justice (1976:29) in their work on child abuse. Hence the table yields three subgroups for comparison: the Aged Abuse Victims (from our study); and the "Abusing Parents" and "Non-Abusing Parents" from the Justice and Justice study. We have used the same categorization system for the scores, and the same statistics (chi square), in order to make our results comparable to theirs.

First, as can be seen from the table, the Justices found a significant difference between the scores of the abusive parents and those of the non-abusive control group. As they note, this suggests that the abusive parents "... had experienced excessive change during the 12 months prior to the onset their abusive behavior. ... these individuals had no time to regroup before they were hit by a new crisis" (Justice and Justice, 1976:29). The mean score for the abusing parents was 233.63, over 100 points higher than the mean score of the non-abusing parents (123.62). A chi square calculated to compare the distribution of scores of the two groups (as shown in Table 5) indicates that this difference is significant at greater than the .001 level.

What is more interesting is the fact the group of aged abuse victims had an even higher Social Readjustment rating than the abusive parents. Their mean score of 341.60 was over 100 points higher than even the abusing parents, and 200 points higher than the non-abusing parents. The chi square analysis indicates that this distribution of scores is significantly different from the non-abusing parents but not significantly different from the abusing parents. Hence we can conclude that the aged abuse victims, like abusing parents, are persons who have experienced in their lives, and the lives of their families, a large number of highly stressful conditions over the course of the year in which the abuse was reported.

Victims interviewed were also asked to tell us what their three most serious problems of the past month were, and then to tell us which one upset them most. It is interesting to note that the majority of the abused elders we talked to did not mention the abuse as the major problem in their

lives. Only 30% listed the abuse they had suffered as the worst thing that had happened or the most bothersome problem for them. It is also interesting that in several of these instances, the abuse was financial in nature. Presumably, financial abuse is fairly obvious and straightforward in character (more so than psychological abuse, for example), but it also may be less emotionally difficult to admit or discuss than physical or psychological abuse.

For another 25% of the victims, the worst problem mentioned was similar to the abuse reported. For example, an aged victim with an alcoholic daughter who subjected her to severe psychological abuse cited her "relationship with her daughter" as the worst problem, rather than the specific abuse or the alcoholism. Another victim, physically abused by her husband to the point of requiring hospitalization, listed as her major problem the fact that her husband did not respect her.

In these cases it is apparent that the victims are viewing the abusive situation in more global --- and perhaps more realistic --- terms. They appear to recognize that the problem does not stem from a single abusive incident but rather from the entire pattern of the relationship between themselves and the other members of their families.

In contrast, 45% of the victims mentioned major problem areas quite different from the abuse suffered. In one instance, a victim had a schizophrenic son who beat her and other children who neglected her; her most distressing problem, she said, that she had no friends. In two other cases, the victims had children who were verbally abusive, and one was even physically abusive; both claimed their most disturbing problem was the fact that the house was dirty. Still another case was an elderly, disabled man whose wife and children had taken all his money and abandoned him; his main problem, as he saw it, was the fact that the landlord criticized him.

One might conclude from these instances, either that the aged person finds the abuse so unsettling that he/she is unable to admit how upsetting it really is, or, conversely, that the victim has concluded that the abuse is inevitable and nothing can be done about it. Consequently, victims may focus on the more mundane, less important items about which something can be done, certainly a very healthy approach in the face of unsurmountable difficulties.

Implications of the Research

It is clear that the families of these victims have been beset by a large number of problems in a relatively short span of time. Further, it appears that most of the abuse victims define their most serious family problems in terms other than the direct abuse observed. For some, this may represent a denial of the problem or a resignation to its inevitability. For others it seems to indicate a recognition of the fact that the abuse is simply a segment of the much broader character of the difficulties they and their families face.

One can never condone an attack on a defenseless old person, any more than one can condone an attack on a defenseless child or any other human being. However, resolution of the problem requires more than simply placing blame on an offender. For in many instances, both offender and victim may be caught in a web of personal and family problems from which they see no opportunity for escape. American legal scholars often speak of "crimes without victims" (Morris and Hawkins, 1970:6). Perhaps it is also useful to think of much domestic abuse in terms of "crimes without villains", recognizing that the abuser is as much a victim of unfortunate circumstances -- illness, unemployment, financial problems, and other life crises -- as is the object of the abuse.

Consequently, any solution to the problem of elder abuse requires a multi-facetted approach, including the following measures:

1) Immediate protective measures to protect the victim from further abuse are clearly necessary (Block and Sinnott, 1979). Such measures may include crisis intervention techniques and provision of protective shelters for the victim, if necessary.

2) Counselling for the abuser is necessary to assist him/her in dealing with frustration and problems through less destructive means.

3) Alleviation of the general family problems suffered by victim and abuser alike must be accomplished. This requires that services of all types -- economic assistance, employment counselling, medical care, as well as general counselling -- be easily available.

Such a multi-facetted approach inevitably requires the commitment of a considerable amount of resources, including agency time, money for the alleviation of family difficulties, and accessibility to these services when needed. An increase in such resources must be geared to any predicted increase in family problems such as the current period of high unemployment. If domestic violence is to be eliminated, we must alter prior service patterns in which high problem periods consistently coincide with low accessibility of services.

Table 1

Characteristics of Victims Interviewed

		Percentage	N	
Age of Victim:	50-59	5	(1)	
	60-69	15	(3)	
	70-79	35	(7)	
	80-89	30	(6)	
	not reported	15	(3)	
Sex of Victim:	Male	30	(6)	
	Female	70	(14)	
Race of Victim:	White	50	(10)	
	Black	50	(10)	
Type of Abuse Suffered (multiple types possible)				
	Physical Abuse	25	(5)	Combined Physical 35% (7)
	Physical Neglect	10	(2)	
	Financial Abuse	50	(10)	
	Psychological Abuse	65	(13)	
Suspected Abuser (multiple abusers possible):				
	Son or Daughter	55	(11)	
	Spouse	15	(3)	
	Grandchild	10	(2)	
	Other	30	(6)	

Table 2

Family Problems Indicated to Aged Abuse Victims and their Ranking on the Holmes and Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale

Rank	Life event	Mean value
1	Death of spouse*	100
2	Divorce	73
3	Marital separation	65
4	Jail terms*	63
5	Death of close family member*	63
5	Personal injury*	53
6	Personal illness*	53
7	Marriage	50
8	Laid off at work*	47
9	Marital reconcilation	45
10	Retirement	45
11	Poor health of family member	44
11	Better health of family member	44
12	Pregnancy in family*	39
13	Sex difficulties	39
14	Gain of new family member	39
15	Business readjustment	39
16	Change in financial state	38
17	Death of close friend	37
18	Change to different line of work	36
19	More arguments with spouse*	35
19	Less arguments with spouse*	35
20	Mortgage over $10,000	31
21	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
22	Change in responsibilities at work	29
23	Son or daughter leaving home	29
24	Trouble with in-laws	29
25	Outstanding personal achievement	28
26	Someone began or stopped work*	26
27	Someone began or finished school*	26
28	Change in living conditions	25
29	Revision of personal habits	24
30	Trouble with boss	23
31	Change in work hours or conditions	20
32	Change in residence	20
33	Change in schools	20
34	Change in recreation	19
35	Change in church activities	19
36	Change in social activities	18
37	Mortgage or loan less than $10,000	17
38	Change in sleeping habits	16
39	More family get-togethers	15

Table 2 (cont'd)

Rank	Life event	Mean value
39	Fewer family get-togethers	15
40	Change in eating habits	15
41	Vacation*	13
42	Someone coming to visit overnight	12
43	Minor violations of the law	11

* indicates item slightly modified from original scale

Table 3

Frequency of Problems
for Aged Abuse Victims and Their Families

Number of Problems	# of Victims	
0-4 listed	3	(15%)
5-9 listed	7	(20%)
10-18 listed	6	(30%)
19+ listed	4	(20%)

Mean number of problems = 10.95

Median number of problems = 9.0

Table 4

Most Frequent Problems for Victims and Their Families (N=20)

	% Reporting	Readjustment Value
*Personal Illness	80%	53
*Poorer Health for Family Member	65	44
Change in Sleeping Habits	65	16
*Change in Finances	50	38
Change in Personal Habits	50	24
Fewer Family Get-Togethers	50	15
Change in Social Activities	45	18
Change in Eating Habits	45	15
*Gain New Family Member	45	39
Change in Living Conditions	35	25
Change in Residence	35	20
Change in Recreational Patterns	35	19
Change in Church Activities	35	19
Minor Law Violations	35	11
*Death in the Family	30	63
*Personal Injury	30	53
*Death of a Friend	30	37

* Readjustment Score of 35 or more.

Table 5

Social Readjustment Scores for Aged Abuse Victims as Compared with Abusing and Non-Abusing Parents

	Social Readjustment Scores			
	No Crisis	Mild Crisis	Moderate Crisis	Major Crisis
Sample Group	0-149	150-199	200-299	300+
Aged Abuse Victims (N = 20) $\bar{X}$ = 341.60	3	2	6	9
Abusing Parents*a (N = 35) $\bar{X}$ = 233.63	4	9	14	8
Non-Abusing Parents*b (N = 35) X = 123.62	25	5	[illegible]	2

a. Comparing the Aged Abuse Victims with the Abusing Parents yields: $X^2 = 4.062$, df = 3, p = n.s.

b. Comparing the Aged Abuse Victims with Non-Abusing Parents yields: $X^2 = 18.92$, df = 3, p.<.001.

* Data on the 2 Parent groups are taken from: Blair & Rita Justice, The Abusing Family, New York: Human Sciences Press, 1976, p. 29.

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